

Getting to Know You

A monthly feature about the people in your
On Top of the World community

by John Koning



Cindy's love of the salt life began as a child.

Currently, Cindy is the Ladies 18-Hole Handicap Champion



Cindy Cheung's long and winding road to On Top of the World

To borrow a line from the legendary Beatles song, Cindy Cheung's journey to On Top of the World has been a "long and winding road."

The journey began in 1979, in war-torn South Vietnam. It took her to within an inch of her life and it culminated less than a year ago right here in our community.

Cindy is the youngest child of 15.

When she was young, her Chinese father moved his family to the coastal city of Nha Trang in south-central Vietnam. That's where Cindy developed her love of the salt life – the smell of the beach and the taste of swimming in salt water.

It was a happy childhood.

Then, as was the case for 2 million other Vietnamese "boat people," she became a refugee of war in early May of 1979 – an innocent victim of a brutal conflict and an oppressive regime.

Cindy, who was a teenager at the time, along with two of her siblings and 100 other refugees, were crammed into a dilapidated fishing vessel and sent off to sea. Their destination, if they made it, was a refugee camp in Hong Kong – a five-day trip across the turbulent South China Sea.

Their boat was stocked with enough food and water for two days at best.

In their path lay many dangers that had already claimed the lives of thousands of other boat people – perils like drowning, dehydration and the ever-present threat of pirate attacks.

For three long days and nights after the supplies ran out, Cindy and her fellow passengers prayed nonstop for salvation from the heavy seas, the numbing hunger and the debilitating thirst. Whatever they once held in their bellies was long surrendered to the angry waves that tossed the small craft mercilessly.

But Cindy and her siblings did make it to the mainland where she recovered and found work wherever she could, installing electronic components and producing printed circuit boards on an assembly line.

Her journey to freedom ended in October of 1979 in California as one of more than 800,000 refugees accepted by the United States during the Vietnamese exodus.

Cindy counts herself very fortunate, in part, thanks to her brother who traded his gold rings so that they would not suffer the fate of hundreds of thousands

of refugees who were held indefinitely in Hong Kong camps or returned home to face retribution.

In Los Angeles, Cindy dove headlong into academics. She wanted to be a medical doctor and had plenty of mental capacity.

She could already speak the Chinese dialect Chiu Chow, Cantonese, Mandarin, Thai, a bit of French, Spanish and Italian, but the English language proved to be tough adversary.

Cindy decided to go with her strengths in math and science and pursued engineering instead. She was accepted to UCLA but opted for UC Santa Barbara because of its proximity to the beach. She earned her degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering and that led to a job in Computer Aided Design (CAD) for a west coast company.

When the technology sector took a nose dive in 2006, Cindy found herself out of work. She scoured the Internet and found a job in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, that provided some nice perks and that coveted Ontario health care plan.

She spent the next seven years playing cheap Canadian golf in the summer and suffering through the numbing cold in the winter.

In 2013, Cindy found herself in Largo, Fla., caring for her Snowbird sister who was battling cancer. She was smitten by the salt life once again and started looking for real estate.

She was drawn to OTOW by the amenities and, of course, the free golf.

Someone gave her the Snowbirds map and she drove through the imposing gate and started exploring. You can probably guess the rest of the story but here's what you might not know.

Cindy is now living the OTOW dream and has immersed herself in the lifestyle. She is the 2015 Handicap Champion of the Ladies 18-Hole Golf.

She sings with the OTOW Chorus and she line dances with the Snowbirds Club and the OTOW Line Dance Club.

Cindy's enthusiasm is palpable as she exclaims, "I'm up for any challenge of a golf game, a song or a dance, to fulfill the best time of my life!"

To use the words of the Beatles once more, the long and winding road has led Cindy Cheung to our door.

Lucky us!